

Expectations for encyclical too high

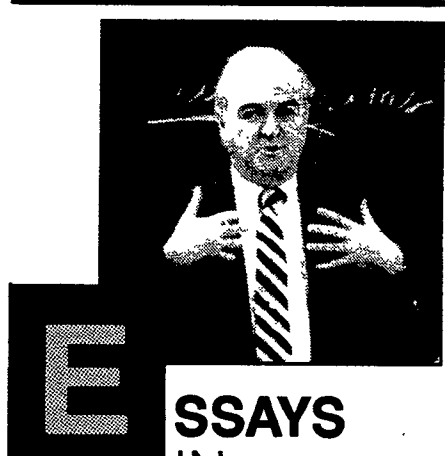
By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The encyclical "Veritatis Splendor" ("The Splendor of Truth"), was six years in the making. During this time rumors and a few bootlegged drafts had been circulating, feeding speculation that the pope would declare the official teaching on birth control infallible and would put in place a mechanism to drive many Catholic moral theologians from their teaching positions, if not from the church itself.

Had any of this speculation been well-founded, the media would have had a feeding-frenzy upon the encyclical's release Oct. 5. As it was, there were the usual interviews, reports, and commentaries, both on television and in the press, but the story either got bumped or downplayed because of breaking news from Moscow and Somalia.

If public interest in the new encyclical isn't sustained, it may be too high. Many had been led to believe that a papal bombshell was about to be dropped, something along the line of Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical dealing with birth control. This hasn't happened. "Veritatis Splendor" is no "Humanae Vitae."

Moreover, the document itself is too long (179 pages), too dense, and too technical. Although a few intellectually privileged university professors may think its arguments are laid out in all simplicity, anyone with



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direct pastoral familiarity with non-elitist Catholics in the pews knows differently.

The encyclical, especially its important second chapter, is tough going, and only a very tiny percentage of Catholics will ever read it. Many of those who bravely begin are not likely to finish, and many of those who finish may still be wondering, for example, what in the world "proportionalism" is all about.

I dare say, not a single Catholic in 10,000 has heard of proportionalism, much less can define it, and that goes for "the fundamental option" as well.

How, then, will the encyclical be received over the longer term? Will it be largely ignored and eventually forgotten? One certainly hopes not.

The encyclical belongs on the read-

ing lists of moral theology courses at the college, university, and seminary levels. It is especially important for younger Catholics, born after the Second Vatican Council and its call for the renewal of moral theology (Decree on Priestly Formation, n.16), to be directly exposed to the neo-Scholastic theology that formed so many middle-aged and senior priests, bishops, and lay philosophers.

But more than that, students should be energized anew by the pope's prophetic reaffirmation of the Gospel of love and freedom, so vigorously expressed in the biblically rich opening chapter.

Not too many sympathetic commentators on the encyclical are likely to take the point of one of the pope's central texts. When a young man asked Jesus, "What good must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus did not stop with his words about keeping the commandments.

The young man, after all, had been doing that, and he sensed, correctly, that this wasn't enough for a real disciple of Christ. And so Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mt. 19:16-21).

Those of us, especially the financially well off, who are always looking for ways to make others toe the mark of Christian heroism — whether by staying in a very difficult, even destructive, marriage, or by

having more children than one can even minimally afford, or by bringing to term a pregnancy caused by a rapist — are given to a nervous cough and a quick turn in another direction when the subject of wealth is raised.

Jesus' mandate to the rich young man is truly a call to perfection, and that is a quest that doesn't end until death. But that doesn't mean that the call to perfection is meaningless, or can be ignored or rationalized away.

Although there isn't a single Christian who is exempt from Jesus' call, obviously its demands hang heaviest on the shoulders of the rich and privileged, such as successful business people, athletes, entertainers, professionals of all kinds, high-salaried university professors, and those from whom they draw enormous amounts of funding for themselves and their graduate students.

"If you wish to be perfect," Jesus said, "go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

On second thought, perhaps those people who say that the pope has laid out his arguments in all simplicity are right. But the most evangelically direct arguments are in the first chapter, not the second.

The pope draws not from the neo-Scholastic theology of the pre-conciliar manuals, but from the pristine message of the New Testament. One truly finds "the splendor of truth" there.

Can unemployed find spirituality in work?

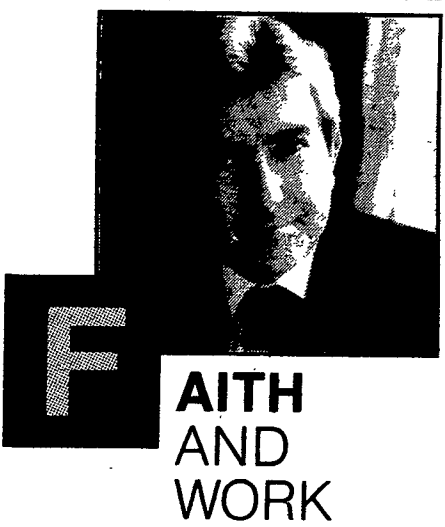
By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Although I've had many different jobs, I've never been unemployed a day in my adult life. For that I feel especially fortunate and blessed, because I truly believe that one of the main ways we encounter God is through our daily work.

Yet I also realize that people who are unemployed must be able to have as rich a spiritual life as I do, and so I was delighted recently to have the opportunity to edit and publish a booklet for the National Center for the Laity titled, *The Spirituality of Work: Unemployed Workers* (ACTA Publications, 1993).

Isn't "the spirituality of work for unemployed workers" an oxymoron? Author Joseph Gosse, who has spent many months out of work, thinks not.

"The concept of the spirituality of work seeks to identify and enhance the ways that people encounter the transcendent, the holy, the divine, the other — in a word, God — in their work," he writes. "Daily work



FAITH AND WORK

is an essential part of life, even work that is uncompensated. Paid and unpaid work alike can enable the worker to deepen awareness of work's spiritual meaning and find the presence of God there."

Gosse notes that being unemployed does not mean being out of work. "Unemployed people often work extremely hard — at family or

volunteer activities, for example, or at searching for a job," he argues. "The spirituality of work for unemployed workers provides a way of achieving spiritual growth in the very task of looking for work."

Gosse interviewed a cross section of unemployed workers about their efforts to discover God's presence in the midst of what he admits can often be a time of "depression and frustration" or "boredom and idleness."

"I know it was difficult for my boss to lay me off since I was a hard worker," notes Robert Parmley, who was laid off from his administrative job with a construction company. "So I looked on my job search as a new mission or assignment. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, but I welcomed the opportunity to find out."

Howard Bushey, a former U.S. Army officer who retired and then earned his law degree, has found it extremely difficult to find a new job. He discovered that unemployment took him off what he calls "the pathway from point A to point B."

He says, "I have finally let go of

my self-pity and decided that I am no longer going to identify with my work — my work will have to identify with me."

Donna Cuning, who worked full-time as a secretary for many years before losing her job, maintains that the strongest influence on her spiritual life has been the belief that unemployment has been beneficial. "In my darker moments, I've had to fight to maintain that belief," she admits, "but as a result it has opened me to a deeper trust in God."

Perhaps Janet Minassian, an unemployed office manager, sums up the concept of spirituality for unemployed workers best when she says, "I've heard that 'when God closes a door, God opens a window.' I hope that's true."

Gosse does not try to minimize unemployment's difficulties and even trauma, nor does he apologize for an economic system that fails to provide meaningful employment for all who seek it. He does note, however, that God can be found even amid the despair and difficulty of losing one's job and looking for a new one.



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